

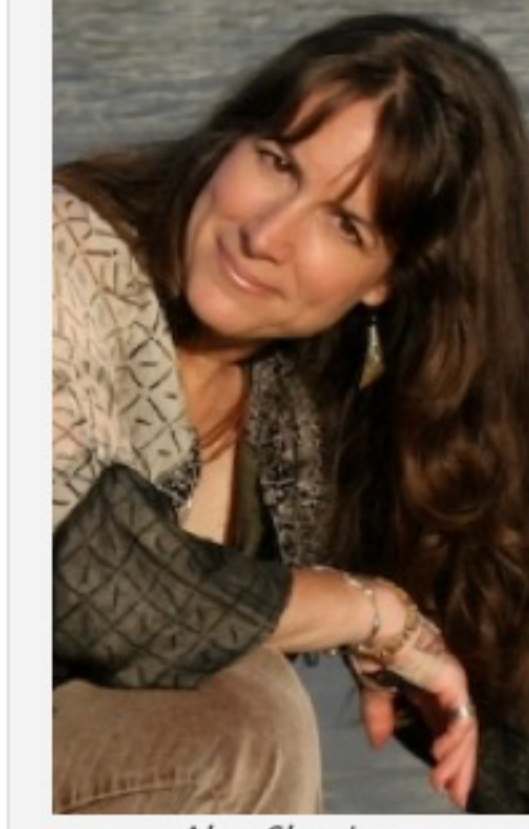
« 5 Handy Tips for New Piano Lesson Enquiries Dvorak's Symphony No. 9: A National Culture for the New World »

## Alex Shapiro: Making Her Own Rules

Published September 13, 2019 Band, choral, Contemporary Composers, General Leave a Comment

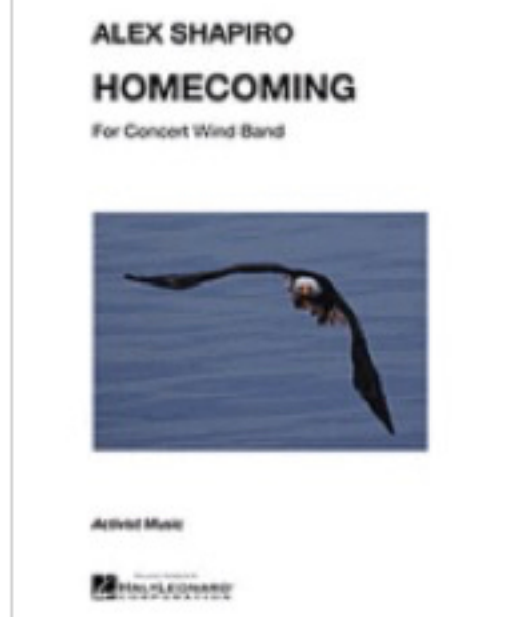
Tags: Band, composers, concert band music, Contemporary Composers, music, women composers

If a composer just so happens to also be a photographer, an essayist, and an activist both within the musical arena and outside of it, it seems fitting that she would describe her own work as "pan-genre and diverse – sometimes within the same piece!" Alex Shapiro's extensive catalog encompasses film scores, chamber music and choral works, but it is in concert band music that Alex has been leaving her strongest mark as a composer.



Alex Shapiro

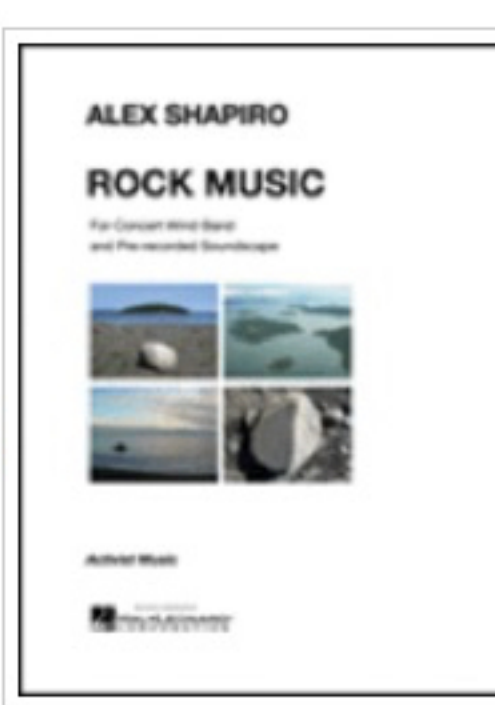
Alex's first foray into the concert band world came in 2007, when Major Tod A. Addison, Commander and conductor of the United States Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Band, contacted her via MySpace to commission a piece. At the time Alex had never composed for, participated in or even attended a performance of a wind band in her life, but was encouraged by Major Addison's openness to her ideas and decided to jump right in.



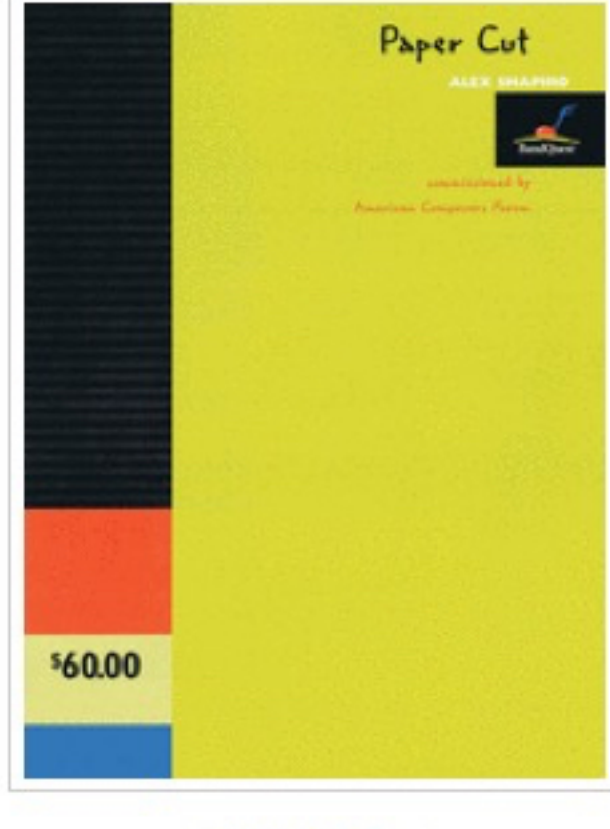
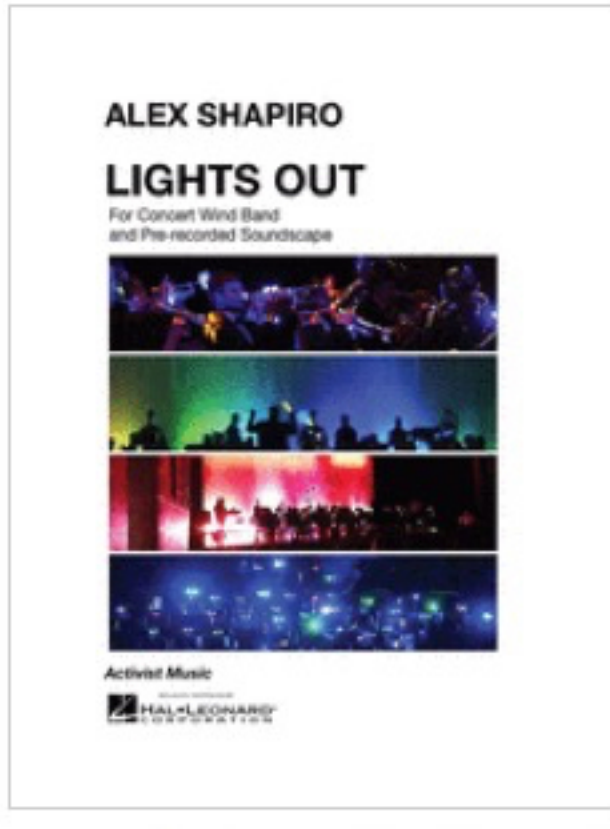
The final piece, titled "Homecoming," folds Alex's sophisticated take on symphonic and jazz-pop music into traditional wind band sounds, while also taking a nuanced, multi-dimensional approach to the concept of a "military theme." The result isn't a collection of recognizable layers of elements, but rather something entirely new.

This impulse toward synthesis is, in fact, a defining characteristic of Alex's work. She takes various components that excite and inspire her, and she fuses them together into new structures in which the building blocks are inseparable and at times even unrecognizable. Alex is not the puppet master who brings together characters to watch them interact, but rather the pastry chef baking a cake, where the raw materials combine at the molecular level with constructive precision to achieve the baker's grand vision.

Whatever Alex's vision for a piece may be, her music always seems to follow a distinct narrative arc. Whether her work is advocating for a cause she cares about, like climate change, marine life, or gender equality, or her music is simply music, she is always telling a story and taking us on a journey. This is as true for her new choral work, "O Death Rock Me Asleep," a setting of a text by Anne Boleyn that follows the queen from imprisonment through beheading, as for wind band pieces like "Rock Music," which incorporates the sounds of a non-traditional musical material – literally rocks – to tangibly connect the music to the earth and to the climate that is changing before our very eyes.



It is not just "Rock Music" that veers from the tried and true wind band course, though. Much of Alex's wind band oeuvre is what she has dubbed "electroacoustic," meaning that it incorporates pre-recorded electronic tracks into performance. In many cases, such as with "Lights Out" and "Paper Cut," it can be difficult to tell which sounds are coming from the electronic track and which are coming from the live instrumentalists. This is especially true when the pieces are performed in black light, which is part of the recommended presentation of "Lights Out," and which has seemed to have caught on for about one-third of the performances of "Paper Cut." With the electronic and the acoustic melding together and becoming indistinguishable, these pieces echo the increasing parity we're seeing between human and artificial intelligence in other parts of our lives. It's like the core theme of "Westworld" embodied in music (but, well, a lot less menacing).



Even when not done in black light, "Paper Cut," perhaps Alex's most widely known band piece, is a visual and aural spectacle as band members manipulate pieces of paper to make a range of percussive sounds and execute basic choreography with the paper to give the audience a full show. Commissioned by the American Composers Forum, "Paper Cut" was originally composed for middle school band, but it continues to be popular with bands of all ages and levels because it's just so fun. Here are the Jackson Middle School Symphonic Winds of Grove City, OH performing the piece at Capital University in February 2018:



Whether it's these sorts of novelty elements, accompanying videos or photograph reels, or basic choreographed moves or staging, Alex doesn't simply compose music, but exploits an audience's heavy reliance on visuals to construct entire performance pieces with music at their core. In the band world, she says, "there are no limits" – and she revels in the stream of endless possibilities.

At the same time, however, it's worth noting that her music is remarkably direct and succinct. It makes sense, then, that she cites Beethoven as her "goalpost" for economy of motivic development and usage and speaks in amazement that he could build an entire symphonic movement from just four notes – three of which are identical. Perhaps it is that economy that has allowed those four notes that open Beethoven's Fifth Symphony to connect with audiences so strongly that they have become one of the most recognizable themes in all of music history. This is precisely the sort of emotional chord that Alex aims to strike in her music, and like Beethoven, she also lets a strong voice shine through to confidently guide the audience on their emotional journey.



Alex Shapiro

Human connection is central not only to Alex's work, but also to her career as a composer. She uses Skype to get into rehearsal rooms with groups performing her pieces. In addition to her many works for professional ensembles, she writes music meant for the educational system so that she can make sure that more women are represented in the music that young learners are playing – and so that children of all genders, races and creeds can understand that there is a place for them in the music world. She is a mainstay at conferences and in the leadership of various professional organizations so that she can encourage her peers in developing their own sense of self-worth and help guide them as business operators. And these connections that she builds in turn make her a strong advocate, a happy and fulfilled human being, and a vital part of the music community.

"Everything is interconnected," she says. And so she writes. And so she lives.

### Share:



★ Like One blogger likes this.

### Related

[New Year's Music Selling Contest for Composers, Arrangers, and Songwriters](#)  
 December 9, 2014  
 In "Composing and Arranging"

[VOCES8 Premieres Six New Commissions during LIVE From London Christmas Festival](#)  
 December 5, 2020  
 In "choral"

[Cantabile Qualities: Choral Music by Beethoven](#)  
 May 9, 2019  
 In "choral"

### About Take Note:

Thought-provoking articles by musicians for musicians, music educators, or those that want to learn more about music!

Shop at: **sheetmusicplus.com**

FREE Newsletter: Get exclusive discounts and content. [Sign Up Today](#)

### Categories

- Band (5)
- Business (3)
- cantata (4)
- Chamber Music (3)
- choral (27)
- classical (12)
- Composing and Arranging (9)
- conferences (1)
- Contemporary Composers (15)
- continuing education (1)
- Distance Learning (5)
- Entrepreneurship (2)
- events (1)
- General (255)
- guitar (1)
- How To Articles (26)
- Instrument Guides (26)
- jazz (1)
- Learn to Play (31)
- marketing tips (6)
- Methods (26)
- Music 101 (5)
- music education (11)
- Music in Community (28)
- New Releases (18)
- nonprofits (4)
- Online Education (2)
- orchestra (5)
- Organ (2)
- piano (12)
- practice (3)
- Practice & Performance (32)
- Publishing (6)
- Repertoire (71)
- reviews (1)
- Sacred Music (15)
- Small Business (3)
- Social Distancing (5)
- Teacher Resources (58)
- Tech Tips (4)
- Top 10 Tips & Facts (42)
- ukulele (1)

### Recent Posts:

- [Getting Started With Jazz Guitar](#)
- [Making Connections & Creating Community In an Overscheduled World](#)
- [In Another Guise: Recycling and Borrowing in J. S. Bach's Works](#)
- [Ralph Vaughan Williams: Preserving Publishing Legacy](#)
- [Mariachi – Yes, It's Part of the Program](#)

### Search:

### Email Subscription

Enter your email address to follow this blog and receive notifications of new posts by email.

[Subscribe](#)

Join 455 other subscribers

### RSS Feeds:

- [RSS – Posts](#)
- [RSS – Comments](#)

Tags Baerenreiter Baerenreiter Band Beethoven Beethoven music Carus-Verlag Choral choir music choir music choral choral choral sheet music Christmas Christmas music Christmas sheet music church choir church music Classical music classical period Classical sheet music classical Urtext Editions composer composers Contemporary Composers Edition Peters Edition Peters sheet music guide Leonard how to play woodwinds instruments how to read music interview jazz Jubilate Group learn to play woodwinds instruments learn to read music Ludwig van Beethoven market music music education musicians music in Community music study music teachers music theory performers piano piano lessons piano method Piano method book piano method piano music piano performance piano sheet music student piano teacher practice Romantic composers Romantic Era Romantic period sacred choral choral music Sacred music self-publishing sheet music Sheet Music Plus teaching resources 10 article Urtext Editions Urtext sheet music

### Connect with Sheet Music Plus

### Twitter Updates

- [#BrokenHeartsClub](#) : Rachmaninoff Piano Concerto No. 2 in C minor  
[18 sheetmusicplus.com/title/ra...](#)  
[co... #Rachmaninov...](#)  
[twitter.com/1/web/status/1...](#)  
 3 days ago
- [#BrokenHeartsClub](#) : Berlioz's Symphonie Fantastique  
[sheetmusicplus.com/title/berlioz...](#)  
[#Berlioz #SymphonieFantastique](#)  
[twitter.com/1/web/status/1...](#)  
 4 days ago
- Next up in the [#BrokenHeartsClub](#): Beethoven's Fur Elise  
[sheetmusicplus.com/title/fur-elise...](#)  
[#Beethoven #FurElise...](#)  
[twitter.com/1/web/status/1...](#)  
 4 days ago
- [Broken Hearts Club: Brahms Piano Op. 8](#)  
[sheetmusicplus.com/title/brahms-op-8...](#)  
[tr... #Brahms #PianoTrio](#)  
[#ValentinesDay...](#)  
[twitter.com/1/web/status/1...](#)  
 4 days ago
- Happy [#NationalGuitarDay!](#)! Our newest blog post features guest Chad Johnson – guitarist and...  
[twitter.com/1/web/status/1...](#)  
 1 week ago

[Follow @sheetmusicplus](#)